Abstract: The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to examine social identity construction among new members of a predominantly gay men’s chorus. Sixteen men (12 White, 2 Hispanic, 2 African-American) whose ages ranged from 23 to 62 years old agreed to participate in the study. Research questions examined were (1) In what ways does social identity construction among first-year members of a predominantly gay men’s chorus align with tenets of Social Identity Theory? (2) What role does comparative and autonomous judgment play in their social identity formation? Findings from the first research question indicated that participants’ experiences were most aligned with social creativity. Findings from the second research question indicated that members’ descriptions of personal experiences were more congruent with autonomous judgment, rather than group comparisons.
First Rehearsal

The air of joy and excitement on this first rehearsal night of the season is palpable. Regardless of age, size, income, or attire, all are welcome. Everyone who enters the building is greeted at the door with a warm smile, a handshake, or a hug. New singers are personally guided to a registration table and then escorted to chairs in the main rehearsal hall where they are strategically placed next to key leaders. These leaders are designated as “Big Buddies” who have volunteered to serve as helpful guides for new members throughout the first season.

After some introductory remarks by the organization’s president, the conductor is introduced to a standing ovation of cheers, hoots, and hollers. “Welcome! I’m thrilled you are here!” he proclaims. An energetic rehearsal filled with ample praise and high artistic demands is interspersed with video clips of past performances that generate a still hush and silent tears of pride among the singers. The bonds between members seem to transcend musical rewards to something deeper. As researchers, we are curious to investigate how new members might find their own sense of identity within the group during their first year of membership. (Field Notes, August 21, 2012)

Review Of Literature

Choral singing is one of the most accessible means of community music making available, with literally millions of Americans regularly participating (Chorus America, 2009). Research examining community choir members’ experiences has focused on issues related to social capital (Langston, 2011; Langston & Barrett, 2008), assimilation (Kramer, 2011), and motivation (e.g., Kennedy, 2002). Additionally, some investigators have been particularly interested in the experiences of singers from unique choral populations, including church choirs (e.g., Faivre-Ransom, 2001; Peterson, 2001; Titcomb, 2000) prison choirs (Cohen, 2009, 2012; Menning, 2010; Silber, 2005), and gay choirs (e.g., Gregory, 2009; Henderson & Hodges, 2007; Hilliard, 2008; Knotts & Gregorio, 2011; Latimer, 2008).

Among these unique populations, gay choirs represent one of the fastest growing groups. Research has shown that these ensembles have provided personal affirmation during politically tumultuous times (Albinder, 2007; Hayes, 2005), social networking (Albinder, 2007; Latimer, 2008; Henderson & Hodges, 2007; Hilliard, 2008; Mail & Safford, 2003), advocacy and support during the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and early 1990s (Elliott, 2007; Hilliard, 2008; Putnam & Rattan, 2004), and a positive means to help members disclose their sexual orientation (Latimer, 2008; Hilliard, 2008).

Although musical artistry serves as the core purpose in many gay choruses, the socio-political implications of participation may vary from group to group, depending on particular community dynamics. Some choruses on the east and west coasts have assumed a direct approach, while others in more conservative areas have been cautious, fearing to even include the word “gay” in their name. While political dialogue and group identity within the gay community is often driven by progressive figures in politically liberal communities, the experiences of gay citizens in more conservative areas sometimes receive less attention. The ways in which gay citizens achieve identity, both individually and socially, may vary.

Theories Of Gay Identity

Prior to 1990, a variety of writers described gay identity development in individualistic, linear terms through stage theories (e.g., Cass, 1979; Plummer, 1975; Troiden, 1979). Many of these theories identify a progression of development in which an individual moves from closeted shame through angry defiance to eventual assimilation into the dominant heteronormative paradigm. Stephen Cox and Cynthia Gallois (1996) argued that stage theories fail to capture the complexity of human development and that assimilation into mainstream society does not necessarily signal a higher plane of development. In contrast, they suggested that Social Identity Theory (Tafjel & Turner, 1986) could provide a more elegant means of describing gay identity.

Social Identity Theory (Tafjel & Turner, 1986) is based on the idea that people strive to enhance self-esteem by viewing their own group in positive terms and that group comparisons are often a natural outcome of this process. Categories within the theory include social mobility (seeking acceptance into more favorable social groups), social creativity (defining or redefining one’s own group’s behaviors and attitudes positively), and social competition (challenging dominant norms through activism). Stephen Cox and
Cynthia Gallois (1996) identified specific ways in which these strategies are implemented within the gay community, as discussed below.

Individuals who place higher value on a group other than their own may engage in social mobility strategies by downplaying membership in their own group as they strive to achieve acceptance in another. Gay men who yearn for heterosexual privilege may de-emphasize or even deny their orientation in groups of heterosexual men. Four subcategories of social mobility include capitulating, passing, covering, and blending. Those who capitulate completely deny their homosexual orientation, may marry women, and live out their existences as closeted men. Men who pass maintain some semblance of gay life but work diligently to keep gay contacts separate from heterosexual contacts, hoping that members of one group may never encounter the others. If asked about their orientation, those who pass will lie. Gay men who cover are willing to disclose their orientation if asked, but still strive to maintain a heterosexual façade. Those who blend demonstrate heteronormative expressions of gender identity and do not view sexual orientation as a relevant part of their lives. Rather than actively lie or willingly disclose their orientation, they seek to avoid questions.

Individuals who place higher value on their own group membership, regardless of its perceived social status, are more likely to seek self-esteem through social creativity. Those in minority groups often seek to redefine values according to their own norms. For instance, while some may argue that procreation between two gay men is impossible without some form of outside assistance, others may argue that children in gay families are all planned and truly wanted.

People who not only redefine values and make comparisons on new dimensions, but who also challenge dominant groups engage in social competition. Many mark the beginning of the gay rights movement with the 1968 Stonewall Inn riot in which bar patrons defiantly fought back when police initiated a raid on the establishment. Activism takes many forms, from radical expressions of rage in groups like ACT UP that fought for AIDS funding in the 1990s to more conventional activities via political lobbying.

Comparison Versus Autonomy

Group comparisons described by Social Identity Theory (Tafjel & Turner, 1986) have served as a useful model to describe ingroup/outgroup behavior in a variety of settings, but some have suggested that these comparisons can be unhealthy and may foster intergroup conflict (Kohn, 1993, 1999; Tyler & Blader, 2000). Yet comparison is not the only way in which individuals derive self-esteem within their groups. Research has shown that in addition to intergroup comparisons, members rely on autonomous evaluation to foster social identification. Tom Tyler and Steven L. Blader (2002) wrote:

Autonomous influences are those that flow from judgments about what constitutes prototypical group traits (in the case of pride) or attributes of members “in good standing” (in the case of respect). In both cases, individuals refer to their group-related schemas in the construction of their status judgments, rather than specific external references. (p. 815)

The extent to which group comparisons play a role in social identity development within gay choruses has received scant attention. The purpose of this study was to examine social identity processes among first-year members of a predominantly gay men’s chorus. Questions guiding the study included:

1. In what ways does social identity construction among first-year members of a predominantly gay men’s chorus align with tenets of Social Identity Theory?
2. What role does comparative and autonomous judgment play in their social identity formation?

Method

Procedures

In order to examine social identity within a particular socio-cultural context, we utilized ethnographic case study as described by Sharan Merriam (1998). The organization chosen for this study proved to be a viable source due to their regional location, longevity, and success. The chorus resides in a southwestern region of the United States often associated with a politically conservative ideology.
Criterion sampling as described by Michael Q. Patton (2002) was used to narrow our focus to first-year members of a gay men’s chorus. We also bound the study by limiting data collection to the first full season of membership, between August 2012 and May 2013. Data collected included primary sources such as field notes from rehearsals, focus group interviews, individual interviews, and optional journaling. Secondary sources, such as recordings, archived programs, and newspaper articles provided rich context regarding the organization’s history and purpose. To provide both emic and etic perspectives, the lead author served as a participant-observer during rehearsals while the second author served as an observer-participant.

Participants

During the first rehearsal of the season, 16 men (12 White, 2 Hispanic, 2 African-American) whose ages ranged from 23 to 62 years old ($M = 40.31, SD = 12.92$) agreed to participate in this study and signed consent forms approved by our university’s Institutional Review Board. Fifteen participants identified as gay, and one identified as bisexual. Fourteen held positions in white collar fields (e.g., physician, manager), and two had jobs that could be described as blue collar (e.g., technician, security guard). Following initial semi-structured focus group interviews, nine men participated in semi-structured individual interviews. These interviews were conducted in individual homes, restaurants, over the telephone, or via videoconferencing, according to participants’ preferences. We recorded all interviews with a Sony digital voice recorder (ICD-P320) and later transcribed them for analysis. Pseudonyms for all participants were provided to ensure ethical standards of privacy. The initial focus group interview was designed to investigate participants’ overall impressions of membership, both musically and personally. Individual interviews focused on themes consistent with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Focus group interviews ranged in length from 35 minutes 21 seconds to 1 hour 26 minutes 51 seconds for a total of 5 hours 2 minutes 8 seconds ($M = 33$ minutes 52 seconds, $SD = 17$ minutes 37 seconds).

Data Analysis

We utilized cross-case data analysis to identify common themes among participants, consistent with John Creswell’s (2007) Data Analysis Spiral. This model provided us with a sequential model of data collection, management, memoing, description, and representation. Trustworthiness achieved through triangulation of data sources (i.e., individual interviews, focus group interviews, field notes, and archival material) was further aided by member checks and follow-up e-mail communications with participants to ensure accuracy. In addition, we submitted our data for peer review to a published researcher skilled in qualitative research with a specialty in social identity theory. Modifications, although minor, were incorporated into the final analysis.

Findings

Findings from the first research question were specifically pre-coded in categories associated with social identity theory: Social Mobility, Social Creativity, and Social Competition. Within these categories, further codes were allowed to emerge. Codes subsumed underneath Social Mobility included Openness and Vulnerability. Codes subsumed underneath Social Creativity were Building Community and Tribes. Codes subsumed underneath Social Competition were Indirect Influence, Assimilation, Political Diversity, Funding Backlash, and Alienation.

Findings from the second research question indicated that members’ descriptions of personal experiences were more aligned with autonomous judgment than group comparisons. Distinctions and subtleties in each category are discussed below.

Social Mobility

Most men in this study were very proud of their membership in the chorus, yet only three of the nine men interviewed individually were completely open about their membership with everyone in their lives. Stephen shared, “If I’m talking to co-workers, I say we are a men’s chorus. (Individual Interview, April 5, 2012) Likewise, Don explained, “I’m in mall security.
I’m not out to everybody at work. And so that’s the dilemma. I think that if I did, it would open up a whole other can of worms that I just really didn’t want to deal with at this time.” (Individual Interview, April 12, 2012)

Willingness to stand on a stage and sing publicly with a predominantly gay men’s chorus involves a certain level of disclosure, whether direct or indirect, that many gay men who strive for social mobility into another group would never consider. Certainly, none of the men in the group would fall into the category of capitulation (those who completely deny their orientation) passing (those who strive to maintain a heterosexual façade), or covering (trying to live distinctly separate lives as gay/straight men). Yet, those who withhold information from certain individuals in their lives (i.e., “don’t ask, don’t tell) could be considered to be aligned with men who blend. They do not lie about who they are, but they seek to avoid questions by omission.

Social Creativity

Social creativity is the means by which individuals redefine values to enhance self-esteem. Singers indicated that the chorus provided a positive means of gay identity that sometimes contrasted with previous experiences in daily life. Yet rather than seeking to place themselves above others through comparative judgment, participants’ statements were much more in line with autonomous evaluation. The chorale provided a positive venue for community building and support that had sometimes been lacking in other venues. Frank valued the opportunity to have his relationship celebrated within social circles:

> In [this choir], my relationship with Jerry is very recognized. People understand what that means to be in a relationship with somebody. If I’m around some of my family, they don’t get it. Because they just haven’t experienced it. It’s very affirming. (Individual Interview, March 27, 2013)

Likewise, intragroup comparisons were limited. Participants acknowledged social tribes (e.g., older/younger, bears/twinks,¹ blue collar/white collar), but did not feel that any group was impermeable. Men acknowledged that the large size of the chorus, meeting on a bi-weekly basis, fostered regular social encounters with people from all walks of life. Chorus members celebrated the diversity of tribes and valued the connections made with individuals they may not have encountered in daily life. Wayne related:

> I’ve seen a lot more walks of the gay life then I’ve known there to actually be. To sit next to somebody who actually does drag, or next to the guy who’s very butch, it’s like, y’all are so opposite, but work well together. (Focus Group Interview, October 6, 2012)

Members also acknowledged the positive function that subgroups had to help members develop a more personal sense of connectedness with others. Frank shared:

> I fall into the group of guys that have kids. I can’t commit to certain things because I’m going to spend time with my kids and that kind of stuff, and I’m cool with that. And I haven’t felt like I’ve gotten any kind of discrimination or anybody judging anybody else. (Individual Interview, March 27, 2013)

When discussing the relevance of gay choirs in today’s society of assimilation, participants highlighted the value of gay community within the organization. Bill spoke passionately about the need to maintain a sense of gay community.

> [We need gay choirs to] maintain and affirm our communities and provide wholesome outlets. In a city like ours, there are [many] gay organizations you can join. And if we don’t have those anymore, then . . . who are we? What are we? We’re just another color in a fabric that loses its identity. (Individual Interview, April 16, 2013)

¹ “Bear” is a slang term usually referring to stocky or muscular men with facial hair, often middle-aged or older. “Twink” is a slang term usually referring to slender, clean-shaven men, often under 30 years old.
Similarly, Harold (African-American) drew parallels between gospel choirs and gay choirs:

I’m thinking about Black choirs. There’s a certain kind of camaraderie; there’s a certain kind of tone. There’s a certain kind of energy. And so I kind of think of that the same way as a gay choir. In that particular space, you can be yourself; you can be open. So it provides a space so that you can get that creative outlet that we love, which is the love of singing, plus being an openly gay man without the fear of retribution. (Individual Interview, March 27, 2013)

Social Competition

Most men did not place high value on direct social activism within the group. They felt that the musical product spoke volumes in indirect ways that more radical action might not. Stephen reflected:

Without really saying a whole lot, we can say it through our music. We can use our credibility and our performance just to relate some of what we believe in, in the chorale. (Individual Interview, April 5, 2013)

Similarly, many spoke about the importance of respecting diversity to encourage inclusivity within the organization and in the community at large. Harold noted:

We very rarely ever talk politics, or strategy, or that sort of thing. And with as politically diverse as the gay community has become, because there are gay Republicans and so on and so forth, that probably is the best thing. (Individual Interview, March 27, 2013)

Likewise, Julio cautioned that overt activism might alienate those outside the gay community:

It’s a gay male chorus, but I appreciate that we want to caution ourselves and not just throw us out there as a gay men’s chorus. Cause for one, I think we want to remain diverse. We’re trying to break down walls. So we have straight men join the chorus. Two, we rely on funding from the community, so we want to be careful, first and foremost, to announce ourselves as an artistic group. We’re competing for funds with others in the arts community. (Individual Interview, March 29, 2013)

Discussion

When examined through the lens of Social Identity Theory (Tafjel & Turner, 1986) participants’ experiences were most aligned tenets of social creativity; however, analysis revealed that participant comments were more autonomous than comparative in nature, as described by Tyler and Blader (2000). At no point did chorus members describe their experiences in ways that elevated their status over outside groups. Any comparisons made were more subtle in nature with the recognition that the chorus offered opportunities for personal growth and connection that may not be found as readily in other venues. Likewise, regular rehearsals with a large group afforded opportunities to interact with men outside normal social circles. Unofficial subgroups were somewhat evident, but all were welcoming and friendly to others. Mutual respect and increased understanding of others nurtured the inclusive environment valued by the organization.

No one mentioned seeking upward mobility into another more esteemed group, but they did express feelings of vulnerability that caused them to consider with whom they could share their experiences. Such caution aligns with previous work examining gay job discrimination in the workplace (e.g., Bishop, Caraway, & Stader, 2010; Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez, & King, 2008; Liddle, Luzzo, Hauenstein, & Schuck, 2004; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Waldo, 1999). Similarly, group members expressed little interest in overt social activism. Alternatively, they believed that excellence in public performance served as a powerful form of subtle activism that might foster understanding and continued support.

Implications

Since 2010, strides towards gay equality have skyrocketed. The repeal of anti-gay policies such as Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) have signaled a changing world. Public awareness of gay issues is mirrored in television media, movies, and the Internet. However, in spite of these strides, employers can cite sexual orientation as
grounds for dismissal without fear of retribution in many states. Disclosing one’s orientation and establishing a positive sense of self-esteem can still be especially challenging for many gay men in politically conservative areas. Organizations like the one in this study can provide a valuable source for individuals who seek support and a sense of community. While some may criticize groups like this for their less overtly social activism, their inclusivity provides a safe vehicle for all and may be seen as a positive bridge between the gay and straight community.

Attitudes toward the gay community are changing most rapidly among younger generations (Jones, Cox, Navarro-Rivera, 2014), which suggests that more students may come out in their school environments. Social change, especially in traditionally conservative environments, may not always be welcomed. Accordingly, teachers may be faced with conflicts within their school settings that could require attention. Music teachers who want to promote tolerance and respect through models of artistic excellence may want to consider incorporating gay men’s choral recordings in their classrooms. From a purely musical standpoint, many organizations have recorded standard choral music such as Franz Biber’s Ave Maria that provide superb examples of vowel placement, dynamic expression, and diction. From a social perspective, these groups also often serve as models of inclusivity, tolerance, and support.

Similarly, the autonomous assessment documented among participants in this study might serve as positive models for performing groups that may be tempted to judge themselves against others. While comparative judgment of others may be a natural part of identity categorization, autonomous assessment seems to be a healthier alternative. Choral directors have the power to set a positive tone for their groups; yet, sometimes group dynamics may make such pursuits challenging. Mentoring that guides singers away from group comparisons and toward autonomous evaluations may provide a dynamic that fosters support and reduces stress. Tom Tyler and Steven Blader (2002) observed, “People are not simply prisoners of a competitive social dynamic. They can be affected by autonomous judgments about the quality of their lives” (p. 832).

Autonomous judgment provides a viable means of self-assessment, based on intrinsically meaningful goals. In contrast, the gains from comparative judgment may seem shallow. Alan Downs (2012) documented the experiences of clients in psychotherapy and discovered that the gains associated with external rewards (e.g., wealth, looks, degrees, awards, etc.) were only temporary. In contrast, he advocated for true acceptance through authentic validation:

You don’t need to be more spiritual, richer, friendlier, better looking, younger, or living on a beach. In this moment, all you need to be is you. Only in that space will you find lasting contentment. (p. 106)

If choral directors can instill a similar sense of personal self worth in their students, they will have moved beyond musical service to something much deeper that students can carry with them throughout their lives.

References


